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PP RUEHPA
DE RUEHUJA #0879 1391442
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 191442Z MAY 09 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY ABUJA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6060
INFO RUEHOS/AMCONSUL LAGOS PRIORITY 1341
RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD 0299
RUEHSA/AMEMBASSY PRETORIA 1903
RUEHYD/AMEMBASSY YAOUNDE 0852
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C O N F I D E N T I A L ABUJA 000879

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DEPT FOR AF/W, INR/AA
BAGHDAD FOR DMCULLOUGH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/23/2019

TAGS: PGOV PREL NI

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: DEFENSE HQ'S PRESS CONFERENCE ON THE
LATEST IN THE NIGER DELTA

REF: IIR 6 871 0074 09

Classified By: Political Counselor Walter N.S. Pflaumer for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) On May 18, Colonel C.A. Jemitolu, Defense Headquarters' Director of Information, gave a press conference to provide an update on the upsurge of fighting in Delta State between the Joint Task Force (JTF) and criminal/militant groups. The conference was attended by Poloff, other Mission officers, and officials from other embassies, as well as representatives from various Nigerian news outlets. Jemitolu began by attributing the fighting to the May 13 ambush of JTF forces by militants (reftel), which Jemitolu claimed resulted in the deaths of several Nigerian soldiers, the hijacking of the M/V Spirit, and the torture and kidnapping of a number of the Spirit's crew. He said subsequent fighting, in which the JTF targeted Tom Polo's "Camp Five," was merely a defensive response to the "unjustified aggression of the criminals." Jemitolu took pains to assert that the JTF was "at no time the aggressors ... and extra care has been taken to limit collateral damage...and no communities were razed" as a result of the JTF's actions. Only a handful of journalists' questions were allowed; Jemitolu's responses included a refusal to give any specific figures of JTF casualties, a denial that a JTF helicopter had been shot down, and a refusal to elaborate on basically almost any aspect of the matter. The entire press conference was finished in eight minutes.

¶2. (C//NF) DAO reports that a senior Nigerian defense official later went on to say that foreign citizens were advised to avoid the Delta until a "naval blockade was put in place," and he said that as some members of Camp Five had fled to other nearby camps, the JTF was attacking those as well. He said the JTF's attack on Camp Five was intended to send a message to other criminals/militants, that if such a large, well-armed camp could be taken down by the JTF, then no camp was safe. He denied press reports that jet fighters and artillery had been used to attack, saying that all of the JTF's tactics involved small arms and the very limited, tightly-controlled use of helicopter gunship support. Last, he said that camps had been set up for internally displaced persons.

¶3. (C) COMMENT: The mantra repeated throughout the press conference was "everything in the Delta was peaceful until those criminals spoiled it all by attacking us," which sounds like a strange statement to make on behalf of a task force set up to root out criminality/militancy, unless one realizes that the normal state of affairs between the two groups is indeed an equilibrium that allows both to minimize casualties while maximizing profit, primarily from oil bunkering.

Although other reporting suggests that the GON has been contemplating a military move against the "militants" for some time, the real mystery is why this fighting -- whose scope and violence is far greater than anything the Niger Delta has seen in several years -- has flared up as a result of a relatively minor skirmish. END COMMENT.

¶4. (U) This cable was coordinated with Consulate Lagos.
SANDERS